

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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BLACKBIRD/STARLING CONTROL POLICY ISSUED

Secretary of the Interior Thomas S. Kleppe announced today a policy on the control of wintering blackbirds and starlings which pose hazards to agriculture and human health and safety.

The birds, whose population is conservatively estimated at more than a half billion each winter, have created problems in recent years as habitat changes have brought them into conflict with human activities. Large concentrations of birds have caused significant damage to crops and personal property and have been responsible for aircraft crashes that involved loss of human life. Winter roosts of up to 10 million birds can produce a thick layer of droppings which creates a serious nuisance and heightens the likelihood of people contracting histoplasmosis--a lower respiratory infection.

Under the policy guidelines, being published in the Federal Register, Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will allow the removal of up to 10 percent of the national blackbird postbreeding population through the use of lethal control methods. The starling population, which makes up approximately 20 percent of the national blackbird/starling winter roost, can be reduced by not more than 10 million. Since starlings are generally more aggressive than other birds, it is not expected that there will be any permanent reduction of starling numbers in this country. Spring-summer breeding replenishes winter losses on a predictable basis.

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Control of the birds will be at specific roost sites associated with specific problems. The goals of any control program will be:

(1) Protection of Human Health and Safety

--to reduce growth conditions for organisms that cause human disease, and

--to reduce bird-caused threats to human safety.

(2) Protection of Agricultural Commodities

--to reduce damage to livestock and their feed, and

--to reduce depredation to growing or stored agricultural crops.

(3) Protection of Urban and Industrial Areas

--to reduce nuisances, damages, or economic losses in residential and industrial situations.

(4) Protection of Wildlife

--to protect endangered or threatened species of wildlife when blackbirds and starlings have adverse impacts upon their populations. Control operations will not cause unnecessary adverse effects to non-target species of wildlife or cause other environmental degradation.

Each control program will comply with all Federal, State, and local laws and regulations, and any chemicals used must be registered with the Environmental Protection Agency and applied under the direct supervision of trained personnel.

The Service will provide interested individuals or organizations with information and recommendations of safe, selective, and efficient blackbird and starling damage control techniques. In addition, it will provide training to commercial pest control operators and governmental agencies, and make short-term loans of specialized bird damage control equipment to State and local governments. Operational services will be provided when necessary, such as when control techniques require professional skills not otherwise available, but only upon the request, and with the full approval, of the landowner or operator, duly constituted official, or responsible land or resource managing agency.

Lethal methods for control of blackbirds or starlings will be recommended only when there is no satisfactory alternative method, and when other segments of the environment will not be endangered.

To achieve participation from the public affected by blackbird and starling created problems, the Service will request involved States to develop a procedure to handle requests and to assure local involvement in the selection of a control technique. Each State is urged to establish an advisory board that will represent the appropriate State agencies and local entities and will be empowered to (1) request Service assistance and (2) select the Service recommended alternative for control which is most acceptable to local citizens. Technical expertise and assistance needed to implement the board's decision will be provided by the Service, which also retains the right to overrule advisory board decisions pertaining to Service participation.

The State and/or local cooperative agencies will be responsible for funding and support personnel for operational projects involving the control of blackbird and starling damage.

This policy statement is part of an effort to resolve a lawsuit filed by the Society for Animal Rights in 1975. By stipulation, the Service agreed to file an environmental impact statement on the use of blackbird and starling control techniques and issue a policy statement relating to use of various damage control methods. The final EIS was published in July of this year.

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